

Thank you so much.

I grew up watching my parents serve their neighbors in big but quiet ways. They trained my eye to go beyond the spotlight and see extraordinary acts of kindness that are not well publicized. It happened this week again. Jennifer Velez and I were visiting a foster child the other day and we met a woman I'm going to call Miss Vera.

She and her husband raised five biological children, adopted three disabled foster children and raised them to adult independence. And now, in her late 50's, she is raising four foster children, some of whom are living with disabilities. When her husband died suddenly and too soon in August, Ms. Vera did not go inside herself to mourn; she just redoubled her efforts.

Every morning when her foster children wake up, they face a new day and their armor is her love.

And at her breakfast table, they break bread;

and they create from the ruins of shattered families a new family based in love. And God knows that's what our children need more than anything else: adults who love them and claim them as part of their family.

No social program, no DYFS, no arm of government is ever going to love a child the way they need to be loved, the way Ms. Vera loves them.

Later this month, Ms. Vera will fix a turkey and dressing and she'll pray Thanksgiving grace around a table with 11 children who will range in age from 48 to 10. And when she's weak-kneed as I think she will be for this first holiday without her husband, the love she gave to three generations of children will surround her. And I'm guessing her armor will be their love.

But where is the standing ovation for Ms. Vera? Where is the ceremony for her swearing-in as a child advocate? Or the front page story of her lifelong devotion to children?

Nowhere.

She doesn't seek it; she doesn't need it.

She needs to see her deaf foster daughter smile when she says I love you. She needs to watch her autistic foster son parade in his Roger Celemens jersey as he dreams of the big leagues.

We need an army of Ms. Vera's to repair this broken-down child welfare system.

And it is broken down. Everyone knows that. But it is such an easy criticism to make. It takes no real courage these days to blame DYFS, and to find fault. I have done it. Those are moments of truth, but they aren't

moments of bravery. The real work, the real challenge is to be part of the solution.

And that is a daunting task, because creating a better world for our children means taking on all of our social ills. It requires the army of Veras.

But I don't despair, because we have 10,000 Ms. Veras among us. Think about the extraordinary things each of you has done for children. I look out into this hall and I see loving parents, foster parents and adoptive parents, and mentors and coaches and teachers and happy children and youth

and I know we can create a better world for all our kids. I know we can make them safer and healthier and happier. I know it.

I once had a dear friend named Peter Cicchino who died several years ago. He was a Platonic scholar, a Jesuit philosopher and a law professor, but he taught me that everything you really need to know, you can get in 30 pages or fewer from Dr. Seuss.

Do you know the story of *The Lorax*? He is Dr. Seuss' little man who lives where the Grickle grass grows. The Lorax fights against a factory coming to town, polluting the environment and destroying a way of life.

At every turn, the Lorax begs and pleads for the factory to stop its destruction.

The fish die; the birds fly away; and the people who loved living there, known as the Brown Barbaloots, face starvation and extinction.

They are eventually forced out in order to find food elsewhere. One of the Brown Barbaloots collapses, perhaps dies, and is carried away by the others in exodus.

The Lorax, having been ignored, his cause lost, also departs, but he leaves behind a mysterious pile of rocks engraved with the word UNLESS upon it. And no one for many years can figure out what exactly UNLESS means.

Until at the very end, a new advocate emerges to take the place of the Lorax, and these words are spoken to the advocate:

**Now that you're here
The word of the Lorax seems perfectly clear
UNLESS someone like you
Cares a whole awful lot
Nothing is going to get better
It's not.**

And I repeat this story not to be sentimental, but because I think Dr. Seuss conveys in a simple and beautiful way what we must be about.

This is where we are today: a room of 450 child advocates who care a whole awful lot. So let's make today our collective swearing-in.

Let's open our homes to foster children. I mean it. We have got to do that. Children are sleeping on office floors because we don't have enough foster families.

Let's mentor young parents. Lets support natural families. Let's build up our communities.

Let's adopt children. Let's coach. Let's teach. Let's volunteer at Covenant House, at the Boys and Girls Club, at Children's Specialized Hospital. Let's make a difference.

**Because UNLESS someone like you
Cares a whole awful lot
Nothing is going to get better
It's not.**